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Disseminating research: enhancing the students' experience through the use of multi-level resources

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In this presentation, we want to talk about the principles and ideas that underpinned our book *France 1815–2003* (1) and the website which accompanies it and can be accessed at <http://www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/>. The book and the website come out of two contexts. The first is RAE research conducted under the umbrella of the Centre for European and International Studies Research at the University of Portsmouth, where a major focus of our research has been on war, memory and national identity and colonial and post-colonial perspectives. The second is a precise teaching context within School of Languages and Area Studies (SLAS) teaching courses on European and French history. In doing so we have always underlined the link between languages and history (something we feel is very threatened by the present government's policy towards languages). Without language skills, our means to understanding the past and other cultures is limited, indeed monolingual. Our approach has been interdisciplinary - understanding conflict in French history through primary documents.

For most of students now, the Internet is the first port of call. Therefore, we wanted to design a website that would bring teaching and research together, and provide students with high quality resources at their fingertips.

The book has been designed to stimulate students and help them to structure their learning. In these respects, it fulfils three major objectives: first to provide students with a simple but rigorous presentation of debates surrounding the changing interpretation of key historical events; second to encourage students to use their language skills to explore and analyse a wide range of primary sources, including new or little known archival sources; third to include recurrent themes (such as the role of women) and documents (such as popular songs) which present a version of French history 'seen from below'. Such themes and documents enable students to contrast a variety of historical discourses and reflect on how history is 'produced'. As such they enhance their awareness of the major issues in the field.

Recognising that students have different learning styles, a creative and richly documented website has been developed to complement the book (see <http://www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/>). The website includes more than 130 primary sources (including visual documents and eye witness accounts), but its originality rests in the presentation of more than 34 interviews with leading historians or experts in their field, working in Britain, the USA, France, Germany and Australia. We believe is the most innovative part of the project. Each interview is structured around a series of simple questions, which provide students with a rigorous starting point on which to build their seminar preparation, present arguments for debates and improve the quality of their assessment preparation and output. The website is regularly updated.

The response to the book and webpage has been very positive and widely used by HE students, lecturers as well as A level students. There is also evidence of wide usage in North America and Australia. However, we particularly want to encourage the use of the book and the website among A level students. We believe that it will enhance our outreach work. Further, we organise a yearly 'European History Day Conference' and invite local A level students and their teachers to attend. As such we are anxious to develop further relations within the local communities and participate actively in outreach activities. Feedback suggests that our website is one of the first contexts in which potential students can make contact with a higher education environment.

We have underlined the relationship between RAE and teaching, above all disseminating cutting edge research to a wider audience. However, it is also important to recognise the tensions which exist in this field. For example, how is the work that we have done for this book and the website going to be rewarded under the rubric of the RAE? Should we have used the time to produce journal articles instead? University lecturers have to make choices about publishing. In the context of the RAE, initiatives such as those which we have pioneered risk being squeezed out in the dash for journal articles and monographs.

We fully recognise the vital importance of re-connecting the higher education sector with colleagues in schools and further education colleges, as well as museums and the media. However, for any initiative to succeed it must take place within a structured framework. There must be formal recognition in terms of awards and financial support which will have clear benefits for career development. Crucially, any initiative must work alongside the RAE process and be recognised and rewarded as being of equivalent value. For example, this could be done by defining such work as the dissemination of research to a wider audience which could be cited as evidence of esteem within the RAE.

Notes:

1. Martin Evans and Emmanuel Godin, *France 1815–2003* (2004). [Back to 1](#)

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